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SUBJECT: HIGH LEVEL OF INTEREST IN U.S. POLICIES AT A TAJIK-RUSSIAN
COOPERATION CONFERENCE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite several swipes by Russian Ambassador Ramazan Abdulatipov at the United States, participants in a conference on Tajik-Russian relations showed sincere interest in U.S. policy goals. While the March 28-29 conference on "Russian and Central Asia and the Conditions of Geopolitical Transformation" was geared towards examining Russian-Tajik cooperation, the moderator was quite pleased to have a representative present from the U.S. embassy, and unexpectedly asked PolOff to give two separate impromptu presentations regarding U.S. foreign policy and investment in Tajikistan. The conference brought together Tajik government officials, diplomats from most foreign missions in Dushanbe, two individuals from the Moscow State Institute for International Affairs (MGIMO), local professors and some journalists, and shed light of the sometimes tense dynamic between Tajikistan and Russia over political and cultural questions. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) As portraits of both President Putin and President Rahmonov hung above the podium looking down at speakers at Dushanbe's Russian-Tajik Slavonic University, Russian Ambassador to Tajikistan Abdulatipov gave the opening address, and highlighted areas of cooperation between Russia and Tajikistan, including construction of the Sangtuda-I hydropower plant. He further asserted that no other country was currently doing more to help the development of Tajikistan, and specifically mentioned that Russia was ready to expand cooperation in the new "multi-polar world."

¶3. (SBU) At times, Tajik and Russian government officials exchanged some testy comments, particularly over the role of the Russian language in Tajikistan. Some Tajiks argued that it was not necessary for Tajik youth to study Russian, since Tajikistan was now an independent country. Some Russians replied that learning Russian would open up additional possibilities for the Tajik youths, particularly for the millions of Tajiks who go to Russia to work as migrant workers. A Russian professor also referred to local conflicts in Central Asia. After her remarks, one Tajik government official berated her for her "unacceptable comments," particularly for using the term "local conflict," since all issues in Central Asia also had a direct effect on Russia.

¶4. (U) Most of the presentations maintained a neutral stance towards U.S. policy in Tajikistan, with the exception of one

professor, who claimed that one of the main U.S. goals in invading Afghanistan was to apply pressure on Iran. The moderator noticed PolOff's visible disagreement, and offered PolOff the opportunity to give an impromptu retort. Many people asked questions about specific U.S. economic programs in the region, and asked PolOff to give a lengthier presentation the following day, citing figures of U.S. investment in Tajikistan. Following the second address, attendees asked more follow-up questions than any other presenter received.

¶5. (U) A Tajik professor stated that he understood the U.S.'s need to protect itself, but queried when the U.S. government would start to think about the needs of other countries. PolOff cited Tajikistan as an excellent example of a country that the United States was assisting, noting the U.S. Ambassador would be attending a ceremony the following day to give local Tajik hospitals \$14 million worth of medical supplies. Others claimed that there was a vacuum of information about U.S. policy. A senior Russian diplomat gave the closing address, and specifically thanked PolOff for explaining U.S. goals and assistance programs to Tajikistan, and highlighting the fact that other countries were also actively assisting Tajikistan.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The conference highlighted the mixed sentiments towards U.S. policy in Tajikistan from Russians and Tajiks and demonstrated the need for more aggressive public diplomacy outreach to convey the U.S. message. It also underscored the tension that sometimes exists between the Russians and Tajiks over their bilateral cultural and political relationship. Though Abdulatipov only attended the morning session of the first day, he treated this meeting as if it were a Russian embassy staff meeting. After a Tajik government official made a comment about the threat of Islamic extremism, he immediately grabbed the microphone and lectured this individual that he needed to be careful when using the phrase "Islamic extremism," since all religions were connected to one another, and extremism existed in many other religions besides Islam. Abdulatipov is a Tatar Muslim, and appeared to have interpreted the comment to mean that Islam was the only religion

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with which extremists were associated, which appeared to have struck a nerve. End Comment.
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